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A LASTLY BOOMING RURAL POPULATION AND THE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGE

Bruno Losch

Population in sub-Saharan Africa continues to grow at an unprecedented scale. This will translate into a massive expansion of the labour force, which will account for two thirds of the global increase. Both urban and rural areas are affected but, due to a delayed and stabilized pace of urbanization, population in rural areas continues to grow steadily. This results in a challenging densification of rural areas, with direct impacts on rural livelihoods, increased mobility and diversification of activities.

A UNIQUE POPULATION DYNAMIC

Sub-Saharan Africa was the last region in the world to engage in its demographic transition and, unlike Asia, this transition is slower than was expected. While in Southern Africa and some costal West African countries the number of children per woman has dropped to less than three, most of the other regions of the continent show slower and erratic declines. As a consequence, the United Nations' demographic projections are regularly revised upwards. Between the 2010 and the 2017 editions of the World Population Prospects, the estimated SSA population in 2050 was increased by 208 million people, with the region projected to reach 2.2 billion inhabitants.

This demographic growth represents a massive, unprecedented change in scale. While SSA's population increased by 645 million people between 1975 and 2015 (a similar change to that seen in India), it is set to increase by 2.2 times more (1.4 billion) over the same 40-year time period (between 2015 and 2055). It is a unique demographic feature in world history, which even China and India have never faced. In the meanwhile, the population of Europe and China is expected to decrease and India's population should only increase by 28%.

A UNIQUE RURAL POPULATION GROWTH

SSA is also unique in the enduring importance of its rural population. While the world shifted to a slight majority of urban dwellers at the end of the 2000s and is urbanizing quickly, the region remains mainly rural due to the relatively recent urbanization process. It should only reach the rural/urban tipping point in the late 2030s. In 2015, an estimated 62 % of people were still living in rural areas.

Nevertheless, the urban population has increased tenfold since the 1960s and, as a consequence of booming megapolises, urbanization takes the headlines news. But, urban growth has stabilized at around 3.5–4 % per year today, against 5 % and more before the 1980s – a result of the limited structural transformation of most of the SSA economies. In the meanwhile, rural population has grown at a slower pace (estimated at 1.7 %, with some countries still at 2.5 % and more). However, due to the importance of the rural population (602 million in 2015), a continuous densification of the rural space is taking place, with nearly 380 million additional rural residents being forecast by 2050. By 2050, the estimated SSA rural population is projected to be 980 million – a 63 % increase – reaching one third of the world's rural residents – and it will continue to grow well after the turn of the mid-century. Elsewhere, rural populations will keep declining, or start declining as in South Asia, from the 2030s.

A MASSIVE LABOUR FORCE BULGE

As a consequence of this spectacular population growth, and due to the evolving age structure of the population, the labour force of the region is expected to surge by 813 million by 2050. This bulge will represent about two thirds of the expansion in the global labour force, while the number of workers will decrease in China and Europe. Based on the estimated distribution of the population between urban and rural areas, nearly 35 % of this bulge will be in rural areas, representing 280 million workers.

A change in the age structure, with a growing number of people appearing in the economically active group (aged 15 to 64 years), will progressively improve the ratio between working age and non-working age people. The region will be in a situation to reach its demographic dividend – i.e. the unique moment when the number of active people stands at its highest – which is a major advantage for growth as it reduces the weight of inactive people and releases a significant room for manoeuvre for investment in equipment, education and health, as well as for workers' income enhancement. However, a full positive structural impact of this anticipated improvement in the activity structure will depend on the development of a favourable economic and institutional environment (infrastructure, skills, innovation, and legal framework). If not, the demographic bonus (many workers) could turn into a demographic penalty (many jobless), and result in major social and political tensions.

The utmost challenge for SSA today and in the next decades is to generate enough employment in order to absorb its booming labour force. To better understand the magnitude of this challenge, one can consider the annual cohort of youth entering the working age group: in 2015, the estimated yearly cohort was nearly 20 million; this will reach about 30 million in 2030 and result in a total inflow of new working-age people of 378 million by that date – i.e. the current population of Canada and the United States, combined, in only 15 years. These numbers are not tentative estimates because these new "workers" have already been born (between 2000 and 2015). Based on the existing distribution of population and estimated trends in migration to cities, nearly 60 % of these new workers (about 220 million) are likely to be in rural areas.

A GROWING PRESSURE ON AGRARIAN SYSTEMS

These population dynamics will place a huge pressure on rural economies. Due to their limited diversification and to the recurring importance of agriculture in activities and incomes, the evolution of the sector will be decisive and the possible pathways will depend on the pressure on natural resources and their management, as well as on technical and organizational innovations that would be facilitated by a conducive economic and institutional environment.

Growing demographic densities will be a challenge. SSA has for long been under-populated: the density in 1950 was 8.2 inhabitants per km^2 and it reached 44.3 in 2015. These averages mask huge differences between different regions and countries. Sparsely populated areas (adverse natural conditions or historic under-population) coexist with dense settlements (e.g. the East African highlands, the Sudanian zone, and export-oriented agriculture areas). As a mechanical consequence of the demographic push, the average SSA density should reach 100 hab./km^2 in 2050, with very critical country-specific situations (e.g. 1000 hab./km^2 in Burundi, 530 in Uganda, and 440 in Malawi). This means huge pressure on many local agrarian systems and raises the question of their viability. Tensions between uses (agriculture versus urbanisation or mining) and users of land and water will grow rapidly and will be sometimes exacerbated by the consequences of climate change. These will result in necessary new adaptive strategies, with more diversified livelihoods and multi-situated households using the opportunities of temporary and circular migration. However, depending on the context, when possible, many rural residents will also likely migrate permanently to other places. Devising adapted public policies, taking into account these new territorial realities and their possible futures, will be decisive in order to manage and facilitate this massive process of change.

Fig. 1.1: Rural population in 2015

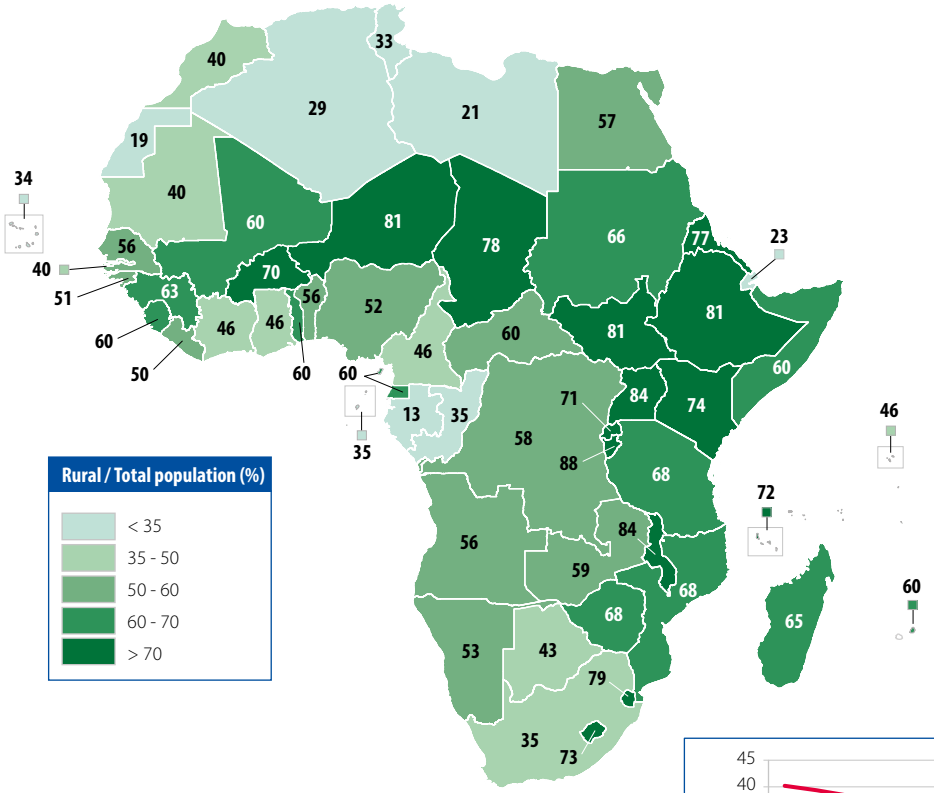
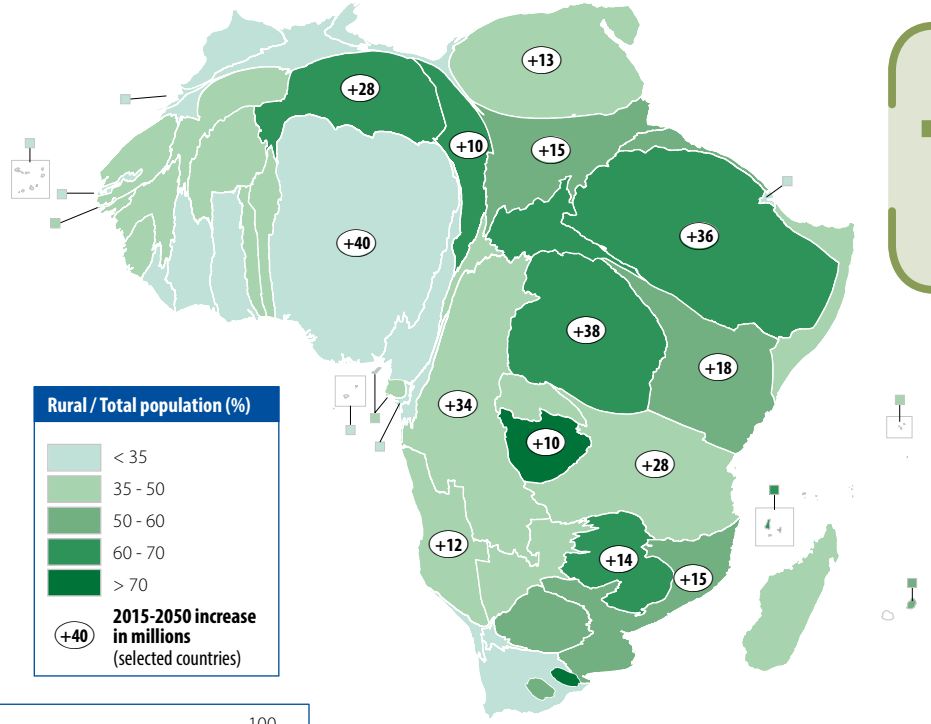


Fig. 1.2: Estimated rural population in 2050
(Representation proportional to population size)



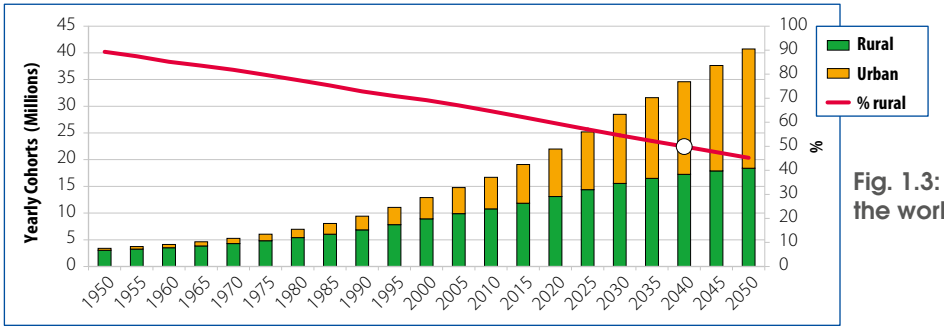
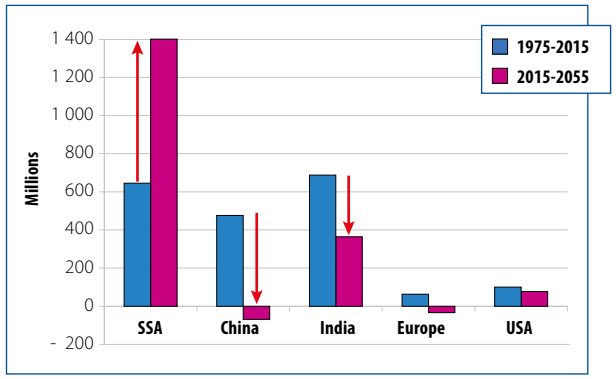


Fig. 1.3: Annual cohorts entering the working age group in SSA (1950-2050)

Fig. 1.4: Estimated demographic changes in selected regions and countries



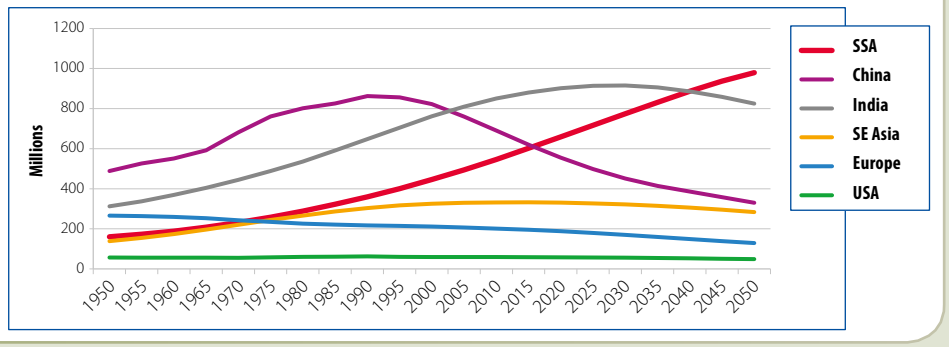


Fig. 1.5. Evolution of rural population in selected regions and countries